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American drama; indeed, the author himself was acutely aware of his limitations as a playwright. On the other hand, neither are these plays wholly deserving of the oblivion to which they have been relegated. If for no other reason, *Van Zorn* extends a claim upon our interest for those respects in which it so clearly anticipates T. S. Eliot's later dramaturgy. And it would not be immoderate to suggest that *The Porcupine*, a finer play, deserves not only reading but perhaps an actual production. These two works at least merit a wider measure of exposure than they have been accorded in the past.



FATE, TRAGEDY AND PESSIMISM IN ROBINSON'S  
*MERLIN*

By LYLE DOMINA

IN DEALING with E. A. Robinson's Arthurian poems Frederic Ives Carpenter has shown them to be a trilogy which describes "progressively three distinct but related types of . . . love. In the language of Emerson," Carpenter goes on to say, "these are: Initial, Daemonic and Celestial Love."<sup>1</sup> He also maintains that "the three loves of Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram came to three different but obviously related ends: Merlin's ended in spiritual defeat; Lancelot's ended in suffering, which, however, promised the hope of salvation; Tristram's ended in spiritual victory." Finally, he states that "Merlin's sensuous love denied 'knowledge' and 'comprehension.'"<sup>2</sup> On the surface Carpenter seems to be as correct in his analysis of the poems as Yvor Winters, who says that "The power [of *Merlin*] is the final result . . . of the concept back of the poem, the concept of human tragedy as the consequence of a falling away from wisdom, and of the falling away as inevitable."<sup>3</sup> Winters later states that "the theme of *Merlin* is fate."<sup>4</sup> The surface of E. A. Robinson, however, is quite likely to be misleading, as the

1 "Tristram the Transcendent," *New England Quarterly*, XI (September 1938), 506.

2 *Ibid.*, 508.

3 *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Norfolk, Connecticut, 1946), 68.

4 *Ibid.*, 86.

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various misinterpretations of many of his poems, notably "The Man Against the Sky," adequately demonstrate.

It seems worthwhile, then, to examine *Merlin* more closely, with particular emphasis on the question of fate, on the nature of Merlin's love affair with Vivian, and on Merlin's "spiritual defeat," and the whole problem of pessimism within the poem.

In a world where even the blindest of men are likely to see too much for their own good, Merlin is doubly cursed by his vast foreknowledge. He sees not only what is to come but also the fact that his voice of warning is not to be heeded. Merlin, himself, recognizes the curse:

"I saw  
Too much, and that was never good for man.  
The man who goes alone too far goes mad—  
In one way or another. God knew best,  
And he knows what is coming yet for me.  
I do not ask. Like you, I have enough" (p. 254).<sup>5</sup>

Merlin is aware, too, of the nature of knowledge or intellect that makes it a curse: that is, he is very much aware of its limitations, even though Arthur is not:

"The King believes today, as in his boyhood,  
That I am Fate; and I can do no more  
Than show again what in his heart he knows.  
This time I go, but never after this,  
For I can be no more than what I was,  
And I can do no more than I have done" (p. 282).

To know and yet not to be Fate, to know and yet to be helpless to act in the face of the inexorable movement of Fate—this is the tragic situation that Merlin tries to escape by plunging himself into a "grave" of sensual love.

There is in *Merlin* the lack of any statement regarding the amount of necessity involved in Merlin's immolation in Vivian's arms. Certainly Robinson's Merlin is not tricked by feminine wiles as is Tennyson's in the *Idylls of the King*, but this still leaves open the question of whether it is predetermined, fated, that he

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1937). All citations are from this edition and are placed within parentheses within the text.

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should go, or whether he makes the decision of his own free will. The collapse of the Arthurian society is clearly shown to be fated—not even Merlin can stop it. This fact seems to suggest that Merlin is fated also, but if he is the poem is no longer the story of an attempt to escape the tragedy of knowledge by plunging into sensuality. It is, instead, simply the story of what must be, and Robinson becomes a transcendental naturalist.

There are other statements in the poem that are pertinent to the question of necessity, however. Merlin makes the following comment to Arthur in his farewell speech:

“Buried alive I told you I should be,  
By love made little and by woman shorn,  
Like Samson, of my glory; and the time  
Is now at hand. I follow in the morning  
Where I am led” (p. 260).

The key word here is obviously “led.” It could be taken as evidence of necessity; on the other hand, it could simply mean “led” by various free will decisions. The fact of foreknowledge, too, seems to suggest that Fate is in full control; yet this need not be, either. Milton has shown us the possibility of foreknowledge with causation. A second possibility, of course, is simply that Merlin possesses only the “foreknowledge” which is available to any man of wisdom. Certainly, as many critics have observed, Robinson has stripped away most of the supernatural powers that are usually associated with Merlin. What Robinson seems to present here, as he often does, is the problem—not the answer. We simply cannot know if Merlin is fated or not, and this uncertainty may well be one meaning of the poem. Mark Van Doren maintains in this connection that Robinson has “perceived the wonder of the situation to be not that Merlin saw so much, but that he, or any other man, could see no more.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, then, Robinson forces the reader to share in Merlin’s paradox. Nevertheless, it seems better to assume at least a limited free will for the simple reason that the poem takes on more meaning in this context.

Merlin goes on in his farewell speech to tell Arthur:

“I see behind me now  
The last of crossways, and I see before me

<sup>6</sup> *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1927), 71.

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A straight and final highway to the end  
Of all my divination" (p. 260).

Again a special problem arises out of the peculiar nature of Merlin himself. Does this foreknowledge apply only to Camelot, or does it apply to himself also? If it applies to himself, surely he is fated because it would be incredible if he were willingly to choose what lies ahead of him when he has foreknowledge of it. Evidence later in the poem, however, suggests that Merlin is not aware of his own destiny, at least *in toto*.

In his bewildered misery Merlin then  
Stared hard at Vivian's face (p. 292).

We are also told that Merlin

saw what he had seen, but would not feel,  
Till now the bitterness of what he felt  
Was in his throat, and all the coldness of it  
Was on him and around him like a flood  
Of lonelier memories (p. 291).

These lines suggest that abstract, intellectual knowledge has little effect on action, that the abstract knowing of something is far different from feeling it, and thus tends to remove the earlier objection of his going freely to such a foreknown fate.

Regardless of necessity or free will, however, Merlin does go to Vivian in Broceliande. He has pointed out, and continues to reiterate, that his knowledge, his intellect, cannot change things. It would seem, then, that he goes to Vivian to escape not so much from the intellect itself as from the inadequacies of the intellect. As noted, Winters sees the tragedy as one of "a falling away from wisdom"; yet all the evidence in the poem, as well as Merlin's explicit statements, demonstrates clearly that intellectual powers have lost their effectiveness.

Merlin's visit to Vivian appears to be escape, at any rate: Broceliande is described both by Merlin and others in Camelot as "a living tomb," and the gate to the palace "has a clang as if it shut forever" (p. 267). That it involves escape from intellect, moreover, is suggested by the willingness with which, at Vivian's suggestion, Merlin agrees to shave his beard, the constant symbol of his knowledge and power. Here again, however, Merlin

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is not just indulging in a perverse impulse to rid himself of his intellect; instead he recognizes that it has outlasted its usefulness.

Everything within that section of the poem dealing with Merlin and Vivian in Broceliande makes it clear that this love is strictly sensual: Merlin constantly describes Vivian in terms of trees and flowers, Vivian dresses in the passionate colors of green and crimson, and even their conversation is sensual.

The seemingly personal failure of this sensual love, too, is foreshadowed in the first evening they spend together: "He [Merlin] drank again, / And yet again — to make himself assured" (p. 276). The inevitable estrangement comes when Merlin tells Vivian the story of Arthur's early life. She immediately realizes that what applies to Camelot also applies to Broceliande:

"We have had  
A man and woman in it for some time,  
And now, it seems, we have a Tree of Knowledge" (p. 294).

The point of the story is, of course, the sin of Arthur in begetting Modred of his own sister. Even though Merlin does not even yet want to leave Vivian, he now becomes aware of the impossibility of his remaining with her, and she recognizes his story as a signal that their affair is over.

Merlin returns from Broceliande to Camelot unknown to anyone but Dagonet, Arthur's Sir Fool. His sensual love for Vivian apparently has proved a personal failure; yet he seems to have gained something from it. Dagonet sees Merlin's "faded eyes" as

more eloquent of pain  
And ruin than all the faded eyes of age  
Till now had ever been, although in them  
There was a mystic and intrinsic peace  
Of one who sees where men of nearer sight  
See nothing (p. 304).

This is Camelot in its dying throes, and the source of the peace is stated in Merlin's conversation with Dagonet. Although it is not for Merlin and Dagonet to see, although it is not for that time or place, Merlin assures Dagonet of

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"the torch  
Of woman, who, together with the light  
That Galahad found, is yet to light the world" (p. 307).

Typically, Robinson fails to spell out what he means by the two lights, but it would seem to suggest a proper blend of romantic love or humanism ("the torch of woman") and spiritual or transcendent love ("the light that Galahad found"). Surely it is significant that Merlin makes this pronouncement after his affair with Vivian. If there is any area of experience that was beyond his otherwise all-embracing wisdom, it was the area of sensual, physical love. Merlin's interlude, moreover, contains overtones of the archetypal descent into the underworld. He describes his journey, as noted, in terms of the "living tomb," and the gate is "A thing . . . vicious with unholy noise" (p. 262). Just as the archetypal hero must put off his previous knowledge in order to gain added wisdom, so Merlin shaves off his beard; to this extent, therefore, his affair with Vivian is an escape from the intellect. Finally, of course, he does return to this world with a newly found wisdom. In the final analysis, then, one might argue that rather than escaping the intellect, Merlin enhances it through his experience at Broceliande; abstract, intellectual knowledge has ceased to be at odds with the felt thing.

Last lines in Robinson, too, as Carpenter notes,<sup>7</sup> tend to be highly significant, and perhaps much could be made of the closing lines of *Merlin*:

Colder blew the wind  
Across the world, and on it heavier lay  
The shadow and the burden of the night;  
And there was a darkness over Camelot (p. 314).

The picture painted here is, on the surface, bleak and pessimistic. The "cold" and the "dark" symbolize, certainly, the downfall of Camelot and the Arthurian society. In spiritual terms they might seem just as pessimistic, especially when contrasted with *Tristram*, which ends in sunshine. With Robinson, however, things are not so simple. The spiritual "light" is never so difficult to see as in the sunshine and never so easily seen as in the "dark." It may well be, in fact, that for Robinson reality

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, 508.

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is "dark," whereas only a dream world is filled with sunshine.

Certainly there are many indications that Isolt of Brittany, in spite of the acquisition of some wisdom, is in fact living in a dream world which makes sunshine possible. King Howel, her father, accuses her of dreaming:

"But he is dead, and you have dreamed too long,  
Partly because your dream was partly true—  
Which was the worst of all, but yet a dream.  
Now it is time for those large solemn eyes  
Of yours to open slowly, and to see  
Before them, not behind."

To which Isolt replies:

"And as for dreaming, you might hesitate  
In shaking me too soon out of my sleep  
In which I am walking. Am I doing so ill  
To dream a little, if dreams will help me now?" (p. 725).

Again, there are Robinson's "last lines" which also suggest a dream world.

Alone, with her white face and her gray eyes,  
She watched them there till even her thoughts were white  
And there was nothing alive but white birds flying,  
Flying, and always flying, and still flying,  
And the white sunlight flashing on the sea (p. 729).

The "sunlight" is not the "light" that Robinson is always so interested in, and no setting seems more certain of hiding the "light" than one filled with sunshine.

The closing lines of *Lancelot*, too, seem to bear out the complexity of determining optimism and pessimism in Robinson's poetry. Riding away from his final interview with Guinevere at Almsbury, Lancelot considers, then discards, the notion of force:

Once even he turned his horse,  
And would have brought his army back with him  
To make her free.

Instead of using force he rides along until he sees

The face of Galahad who had seen and died,  
And was alive, now in a mist of gold.



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He rode on into the dark, under the stars,  
And there were no more faces. There was nothing.  
But always in the darkness he rode on,  
Alone; and in the darkness came the Light (p. 449).

Here again we see the importance of closing lines in Robinson's poetry, as well as the complexity of "light" and "dark." Robinson is not generally regarded as a mystic; yet here he seems to be following the classical pattern of the mystic in that the "Light" arises out of the deepest "dark": in matters spiritual the illumination of the soul arises out of the deepest despair. It is, in fact, just this realization that allows Lancelot to see the "Light." In immediate response to his thought of taking Guinevere by force,

the voice within him said: "You are not free.  
You have come to the world's end, and it is best  
You are not free. Where Light falls, death falls;  
And in the darkness comes the Light" (p. 449).

When one considers the complexity of Robinson's Arthurian poems, therefore, one is convinced that *Merlin* is neither the most pessimistic nor the tragedy of falling away from wisdom; the idea that Merlin ended in spiritual defeat appears equally untenable. If the three poems have a single message, it is that one can only be responsible for one's own salvation, that sensual love is a step toward that salvation, and that the "light" is visible only in darkness. Merlin, as Dagonet makes clear, has found a salvation which transcends whatever there may be of personal failure in his love affair with Vivian:

"The torch of woman,"  
He muttered, "And the light that Galahad found,  
Will some day save us all, as they saved Merlin" (p. 309).

